Position Paper #4

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Discussion

As I reflect upon my understanding of the professional counselor identity and my faith, I think of the comedy-drama television series titled *Shrinking* (Goldstein, Segel, & Lawrence, 2023). The tv show tells the story of a grieving therapist who decides to get overly involved and engage in unfiltered honesty with his clients to hopefully impart change in their lives (Goldstein, Segel, & Lawrence, 2023). It is a prime example of "how not to counsel" as it breaks many of the American Counseling Code of Ethics (2014) and puts the clinician and clients in harm's way. "Jimmy," played by Jason Segel, has moments where he operates out of selfishness, need for control, fear, and frustration when he opens his home for his client to live with him, creates an ultimatum with a client to leave her abusive husband or lose him as a counselor, and shows up in the middle of a client's date night to intervene and give them feedback (Goldstein, Segel, & Lawrence, 2023). It is a poor example of what we do as professional counselors, but it makes for an entertaining series. However, it does highlight this curiosity that I have felt in my experience during practicum and internship of wanting to be "a fly on the wall" in my people's lives to get all of the details in real time and then pop out to give immediate feedback. There is this temptation to cross boundaries and be like "Jimmy" because sometimes I think it would be more effective and helpful, maybe even cathartic as a counselor, to say, "See, finally?! This is what I've been thinking and assuming what may be happening here, and there it is. Can't you see it too?" However, I believe that this is not how God operates like a "Gotcha!" God or a God operates with zero boundaries. I believe that who God is, informs my counselor formation.

The ACA Code of Ethics (2014) highlights six fundamental principles for "ethical behaviors and decision-making." These are autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, justice, fidelity, and veracity (ACA, 2014). I believe that my faith and the code of ethics marry together

well to function as a counselor without believing that I need to control every problem area and solve every issue. This allows me to operate in freedom and with boundaries for the good of everyone involved in a posture of humility and respect.

When I reflect on the character of Jesus Christ and His actions on the cross and rising from the dead, He does not force anyone to follow Him nor manipulate them into believing that He is God. All He did on Earth upholds these principles the ACA highlights: autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, justice, fidelity, and veracity. In the same way, reflecting on who He is, points me to freedom. Hebrews 2:14-18 states:

> **14** Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil— **15** and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. **16** For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. **17** For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. **18** Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. (NIV)

In Jesus, we experience true freedom because He paid it forward. However, freedom is not without responsibility. Philippians 2:6 reminds us that though He was fully God, never took advantage of it to bypass suffering to mend the break between humans and God. He understood His purpose and function and operated with complete obedience, always keeping in mind our good. His fidelity to His character and people is reflected in His willingness to die on the cross for our sins. In doing so, He operated as the judge to put to death sin from His beneficence to

protect us from harm. He exemplifies His veracity in who He says He is and the promises He keeps for us. He is God the Holy One, who is separate from sin and hates wickedness. Not only does He knows where He begins and ends concerning His identity, character, and relation to creation and sin, but He also sets boundaries for those who believe and follow Him for their sake. In the same likeness, professional counselors with this context of this faith background can reflect His image and lovingkindness to not operate in fear and anxiety, but to sit in contentment and peace as well as confidence in their skillset and the Lord to operate in between the client-therapist relationship.

Professional counselors have their limitations--they are not omniscient, omnipotent, or omnipresent. This limitation, I believe, is for our good because we are not God, and counselors are not responsible for every aspect of our clients' lives. This self-induced boundary due to being human provides the natural tendency for me to believe that if I just know more, I could fix more and make healing and understanding for my clients more accessible. However, this is a false hope that control and knowledge will provide all the answers. My practice of leaving my work with clients in the therapy space is an intentional effort that requires me to accept my limitations. Therefore, knowing God and who He is, informs my understanding that the professional counselor operates from a place of duality where freedom and boundaries are simultaneously present for the benefit and health of clients.

Without Jesus, God, and the Holy Spirit, I would probably be like "Jimmy" feeling lost and implementing unorthodox "therapeutic" interventions when I am lost. Having God as my model and my faith in Him gives me stability in how I conduct my behaviors and make ethical decisions that are not exclusive to the counseling session. Virginia Holeman writes, "Theology shapes who we are and how we live" (Holeman, 2012). How I speak and treat people reflects

something beyond the code of ethics, where I believe that purpose is greater than just being ethical or nice, or respectful. The ACA Code of Ethics (2014) is good and necessary, yet I can see where its purpose points to the reflection of who Jesus was and is to the world. God is more convincing to me and being informed spiritually and ethically can only support my work as a professional counselor. I view faith and the professional counselor identity as coming together as a calling. The desire for people to heal from their suffering at their own pace and within a dignified interaction is not mine, but it comes from the Lord.

References

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